

Not here to judge

JUVENILE JUDGE OPENS NEW SCHOOL FOR THE 'INCORRIGIBLE'

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What fear can an approaching math test hold for a boy who has been shot twice in the head? Could learning to play the violin really keep a girl out of a gang?



All photos by Karen Elshout

Just how do you save some of Missouri's most incorrigible kids?

These questions and ones like it have bothered Judge Jimmie Edwards.

So, in a whirlwind of activity rarely seen in either the educational or judicial bureaucracies, Edwards managed in four months to envision, plan and open a school for some of the most troubled children in the city of St. Louis.

Innovative Concept Academy is a first-of-its-kind joint venture between the St. Louis Juvenile Court, which Edwards leads, the St. Louis Public Schools and MERS Goodwill. Juvenile and education leaders around the country are watching to see if the school - and these children - succeed.

A one-stop shop

Disheartened by seeing teenagers getting kicked out of school, passing through his courthouse and then returning to troubled homes, Edwards asked the St. Louis Public Schools oversight board to let him use one of the middle school buildings they planned to close.



Judge Jimmie Edwards makes certain that one of his students apologizes to a security guard for some disrespectful behavior before leaving the school to go back to court. Judge Edwards spends part of each day at the school.

That was in April. Just three weeks later, the board said yes.

Then came the rush to get things ready for school to start Aug. 20. He lined up MERS Goodwill as a nonprofit partner, along with his Juvenile Court. The court, nonprofit and school district reached a 10-year partnership agreement to manage the school to serve, in his words, the city's "incorrigible" youth.

He then found, and continues to find, dozens of community groups and individuals to lend support, from covering the cost for a chess program to donating tables for the cafeteria.

He has tapped sources from law professors to medical schools, football players to well-heeled businessmen. Even nuns. And he created a program that goes much further than teaching English, math and history from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day to sixth through 12th grade students. Edwards believes the community partnership school is the only one in the country overseen by a judge. The U.S. education secretary also visited in August, when the school had been open for a week, and deemed it a novel idea.



A wall of monitors at the entrance of the Academy gives guards a clear view of every classroom and hallway.

Innovative Concept Academy is a one-stop shop. Beyond the regular academics, the children can get medical attention, psychological counseling, three meals a day, lessons in ballroom dance, even a place to wash their clothes. All without leaving the building.

High security

But there are also telltale signs that this isn't your average group of students.

There's a police substation inside the trim brick building, desks for juvenile officers, cameras in each classroom, uniformed guards roaming the halls. There's a metal detector up front, along with a sign reminding students to pull up their pants when they enter. Doors of rooms not in use often are locked. Students are tested for drugs and for sexually transmitted diseases.



Mandy Smith of Kirkwood teaches one of her students how to play the violin as part of the Cameron Youth Chamber Orchestra. Smith volunteers at the academy as part of its afterschool programs.

Jill Triplett, a deputy juvenile officer and assistant supervisor at the school, estimates that 80 percent of the students may have post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of the students have been shot or have watched as a relative was killed.

Students include those who are forbidden to return to their old schools because of Safe Schools Act violations, such as bringing weapons or drugs; those who were most disruptive in the St. Louis Public Schools' regular classrooms; and those who have gone through juvenile court, including some who just completed stints in state Division of Youth Services custody. The idea is for students to attend short-term but not to graduate from the academy, instead returning to their home schools to get their diplomas.

About 100 students attend today, and the population could double by January. Students wear uniforms - white shirts with khaki pants, and neckties for high school boys.

School days

After the regular school day come free, but mandatory, after-school activities, from music to dance, chess to cooking. The typical school day runs 10 hours, from 9 a.m. until 7 p.m. The school also offers academic programs such as ACT test preparation and tutoring after classes. Meanwhile, older students in a program to transition them to jobs work on earning their GEDs. They get job training, overseen by MERS Goodwill. Some who already have jobs then go to work in the afternoon.



National senior shot put champion Myrie Mensey gives her students some pointers in how to throw the discuss as they prepare for the girls first track meet.

In the halls between classes, students get rowdy, playfully slapping at each other, calling to friends two doors down. But when one boy starts chasing another at a full run, a security guard is called to intervene. The two get sent to "the conflict resolution room" to work it out.

During a high school biology class, most of the 12 students sit quietly at their desks working on an assignment. But one boy keeps talking and then stands up, purportedly to redo his tie. The teacher tells him repeatedly to sit down but he doesn't, and security comes to remove him from class.

Students are encouraged to display their school work proudly, no matter the marks, on a bright pink bulletin board at the front of the school - something many had never done before. Positive messages about goals, leadership and respect are posted throughout the building.

Student voice

Charles, 17, likes his new school so far, saying it presents fewer distractions.



Judge Jimmie Edwards greets the academy students. The school is Edwards' attempt to intervene in a positive way with youth who are in danger of falling through the cracks and into the criminal justice system.

"The class is smaller, so you can concentrate better," he said. "You've still got the clowns, but it's not as bad as regular high school."

(Missouri Lawyers Weekly did not use his full name at the juvenile court's request). He hopes to one day work as an electrician or engineer. But for now his focus is on earning his high school diploma.

Charles didn't like the uniform at the beginning, but he has come around.

"It's better because it makes kids look important," he said. "You dress with a tie, you look like you're going somewhere."

The school is humming with activity most of the time. It's also a place for other public school students on short-term suspension to spend their time constructively. And it's where children under supervision by the juvenile court must report after their schools get out. The school functions as a curfew center, too. From midnight to 4 a.m. on weekends, police bring in children they find wandering the streets at night.

The plan is for the school to run year-round.

Discipline plans



The Innovative Concept Academy at 1927 Cass Avenue in St. Louis used to be the home of Blewett Middle School.

Students from this school are not suspended and left to their own devices at home.

Serious behavior problems have been few in the two months since school started, Edwards said. But students face consequences when needed. When two girls got into a fight a few blocks away, they were handcuffed the next school day and brought to see Edwards at juvenile court. That was a new experience for the girls, and they haven't been a problem since, the judge said.

Students can face other punishment, such as cleaning the bathrooms - but only after classes and after-school programs are over.

Edwards oversees the school when he can break away from his court docket. He hired the principal, after letting juvenile gang members who were locked up at the time interview the candidates.



Principal Marvin Talley tries to coax one of his students to do the right thing. "We try to show them that we love them," Talley explained.

"I wanted to make sure that whoever I got as the principal didn't have fear of the children," he said.

He's heavily involved, often stopping by before court begins in the morning, spending his lunch hour there and visiting again when the school day is through.

Back to basics

Students are tested on entrance to see where they stand academically as well as for medical or psychological problems that need attention. Some must first learn to read. Nuns from Incarnate Word and instructors from the private Churchill Center in Town & Country are tutors.

"If you can't read and you haven't been exposed, you can't dream," Edwards said. "They don't dream. They have nightmares. Everything they've known is negative."

Plenty of people are watching to see if this grand experiment works. The U.S. secretary of education, Arne Duncan, paid an early visit, along with the national president of the American Federation of Teachers. The school was also the focus of a national judicial conference on alternatives to juvenile detention in August. Edwards has fielded calls from schools in other states - and even "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Measuring success

A University of Missouri-St. Louis professor, a local mental health board and other researchers are tracking the school's success.



Students at the Innovative Concept Academy listen as Judge Jimmie Edwards explains why he wants them to dream of a future beyond their own circumstances.

But Edwards said data analysis will only tell part of the story. It's fairly easy, he noted, to see whether students improve academically, as the school has their academic records and can chart if their test scores and grades improve.

What's harder to measure, but just as important, he said, is how the students change personally - if they learn to manage conflict without violence, if they learn dignity and respect for others, if they gain the skills to avoid drugs and to keep a job.

Edwards has his own way to measure success: if a full day goes by without a fight, without someone flashing a gang sign, without any student showing disrespect to a teacher.

The court system has an obligation, Edwards said, to help these children turn their lives around. Even those with criminal records, if they don't stand trial as an adult, will return to the community at age 18, he pointed out.

"How do you want them back? Rehabilitated with the ability to be law-abiding citizens or with a more sophisticated criminal mind?" he asked. "If we don't step up as a court and as a community, we will atrophy."